

A PUBLIC BUILDING GROUP PLAN FOR ST. LOUIS

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A PUBLIC BUILDING GROUP PLAN FOR ST. LOUIS

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HARLAND BARTHOLOMEW
ENGINEER

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OFFICE OF
THE CITY PLAN COMMISSION
OF ST. LOUIS, MO.

September 10, 1919.

TO THE HONORABLE BOARD OF PUBLIC SERVICE,
St. Louis, Mo.

GENTLEMEN: The City Plan Commission has the honor to transmit herewith a report on improving one aspect of the city's appearance—the grouping of public buildings. The plan here-with presented is offered chiefly by way of suggestion. It offers a practical method of locating future public buildings and need not necessarily be hastily attempted. In detail of design the plan will require much study once a decision to create the group has been made.

Respectfully submitted,

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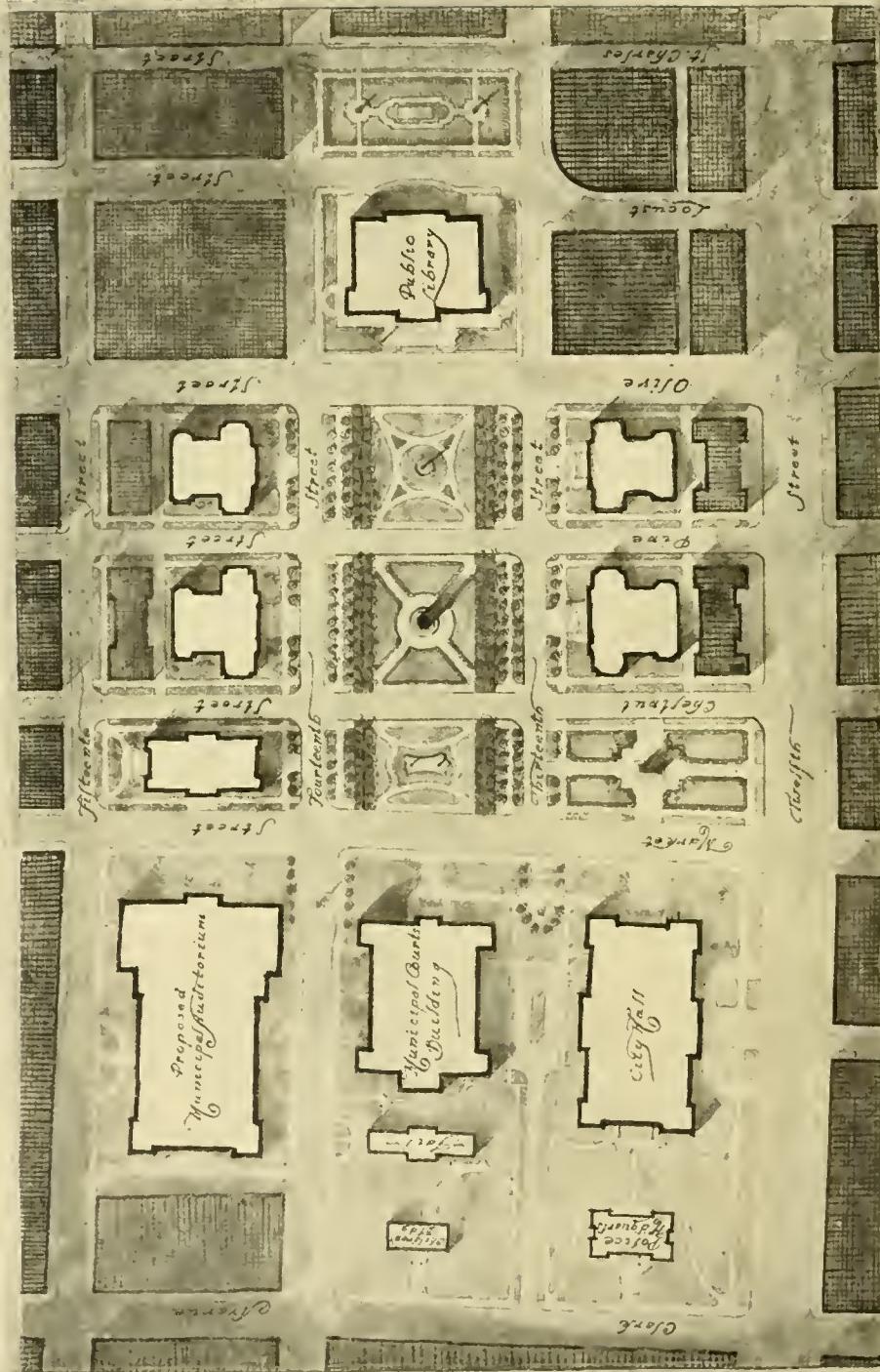
HARLAND BARTHOLOMEW,
Engineer.

FRANK E. LAWRENCE, JR.,
Secretary.

CITY PLAN & PROPOSED MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS GROUP COMMISSION

SCALE IN FEET

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The suggested Public Building Group Plan would necessitate the combination of the three blocks bounded by Olive, Market, Thirteenth and Fourteenth and the block bounded by Twelfth, Thirteenth, Market and Chestnut streets, and create in place thereof a mall on which the future public buildings would face.

A PUBLIC BUILDING GROUP PLAN FOR ST. LOUIS

Utility and lack of proper regard for appearances have been conspicuous characteristics of American cities, but in recent years public opinion has manifested a decided reaction against the distasteful, monotonous, and careless manner in which our streets, public buildings, and public open spaces have been treated. Plans for improved appearances of waterfronts, for grouping of public buildings, and for street treatment have made their appearance in many of the large as well as the smaller cities. We have become conscious of the need for a means of expressing ourselves in our every-day environment in a manner that shall reflect something besides the commercial spirit that has so greatly absorbed our attention.

In the improvement of the city's appearance we should not and will not blindly follow the lead of European cities, though we may well profit by the beauty, the harmony, the spaciousness, and the architectural splendor of the many examples they afford us. American cities should develop a form of civic art that is truly national, that in originality may typify the spirit of the pioneer, that in simplicity rather than in ornateness of design may represent the spirit of democracy, and that in strength and dignity of composition may envisage the faith and confidence that is America's.

Public buildings are the outward manifestation of civic spirit. They afford one of the best opportunities for a municipality to give expression to its aspirations and ideals. It is for this reason that large buildings should be well designed and given a proper setting. It has been customary for the Federal government and for State governments to pay more attention to the setting and design of large public buildings than most cities have done. This has been due in part to the fact that State and Federal buildings are larger and more money has been available for them.

The character of our cities is becoming increasingly an index of the state of our national civilization. In the matter of public buildings, therefore, as well as in other forms of municipal work, it behooves the city to so plan and design its public structures that these may faithfully and fittingly depict the civic spirit.

What more logical suggestion could therefore be made than that, in view of the larger structures to be built, and for which large appropriations will be made, the cities locate their various public buildings in one or more groups, thus presenting in the aggregate an appearance much more satisfying and beautiful than can be obtained by a single large building or by a number of smaller buildings miscellaneous located? A public-building group plan has many advantages. It affords, first of all, an opportunity for the convenient conduct of public business by bringing all public buildings together at a common center. It provides unlimited possibilities in the way of architectural treatment by making it possible to adopt a harmonious plan. It affords to each structure a more splendid and proper setting than would be possible were the

buildings separately located in different parts of the city. In some respects a public-building group plan or a "civic center," as it is sometimes termed, has a commercial value through its being a medium of good municipal advertising. A group plan or civic center should present so satisfying and so splendid an appearance as to make it one of the particular points of interest in the city and a thing once seen, forever to be remembered. For this reason a civic center should be what might be termed the climax of the physical structure of the city. It should be located at the converging point of the principal lines of traffic and thus become in fact as well as in fancy the veritable heart of the city.

Several new public buildings are needed in St. Louis. Within the next few years there will probably be built a Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building (for which a fund has been provided in the proposed bond issue), a new Court House, and a further extension of the municipal offices, which may possibly assume the form of a Hall of Records. In addition to these buildings a new Federal Building is needed, for which a site has been acquired and a portion of the cost provided for. It is also within the realm of possibility that a building will be erected by the State for the accommodation of State offices in this city and immediate vicinity.

The Proposed Public Building Group Plan.

The plan for a proposed municipal building group in St. Louis presented herewith has been the result of many months of study upon the part of the City Plan Commission, and is by this Commission believed to offer more possibilities than any other one of the innumerable schemes that have been devised. It has the advantage of being located on what will become the two principal traffic routes of St. Louis—Twelfth street and Olive street—assuming that the various proposals for widening and extending these two thoroughfares are carried to completion. Furthermore, three of the nine buildings in the group already exist—the City Hall, Municipal Courts Building, and the Public Library. To the rear of the Municipal Courts Building are now located the Jail and Children's Building. In principle, the plan proposes the creation of a mall between the Municipal Courts Building and Public Library by condemning the property and razing all the buildings in the three blocks bounded by Fourteenth street, Market street, Thirteenth street, and Olive street. The new buildings which would then become a part of the group plan would be located on the blocks facing the mall thus created. From the plan it will be seen that the Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building could be located on the block bounded by Fourteenth, Market, Fifteenth, and Clark avenue immediately west of the Municipal Courts Building. The proposed new Court House, Hall of Records, Federal Building, and State Building could then be located to the east or west of the mall, occupying the blocks between Market and Olive streets and fronting on Thirteenth and Fourteenth streets. It will be noticed from the plan that the buildings on the east side of the mall between Pine and Olive streets occupy only so much of these two blocks as lies between Thirteenth street and the alley.

This plan would not destroy the effectiveness, nor the appearance, of the public-building group plan, whose central axis is between the Public Library

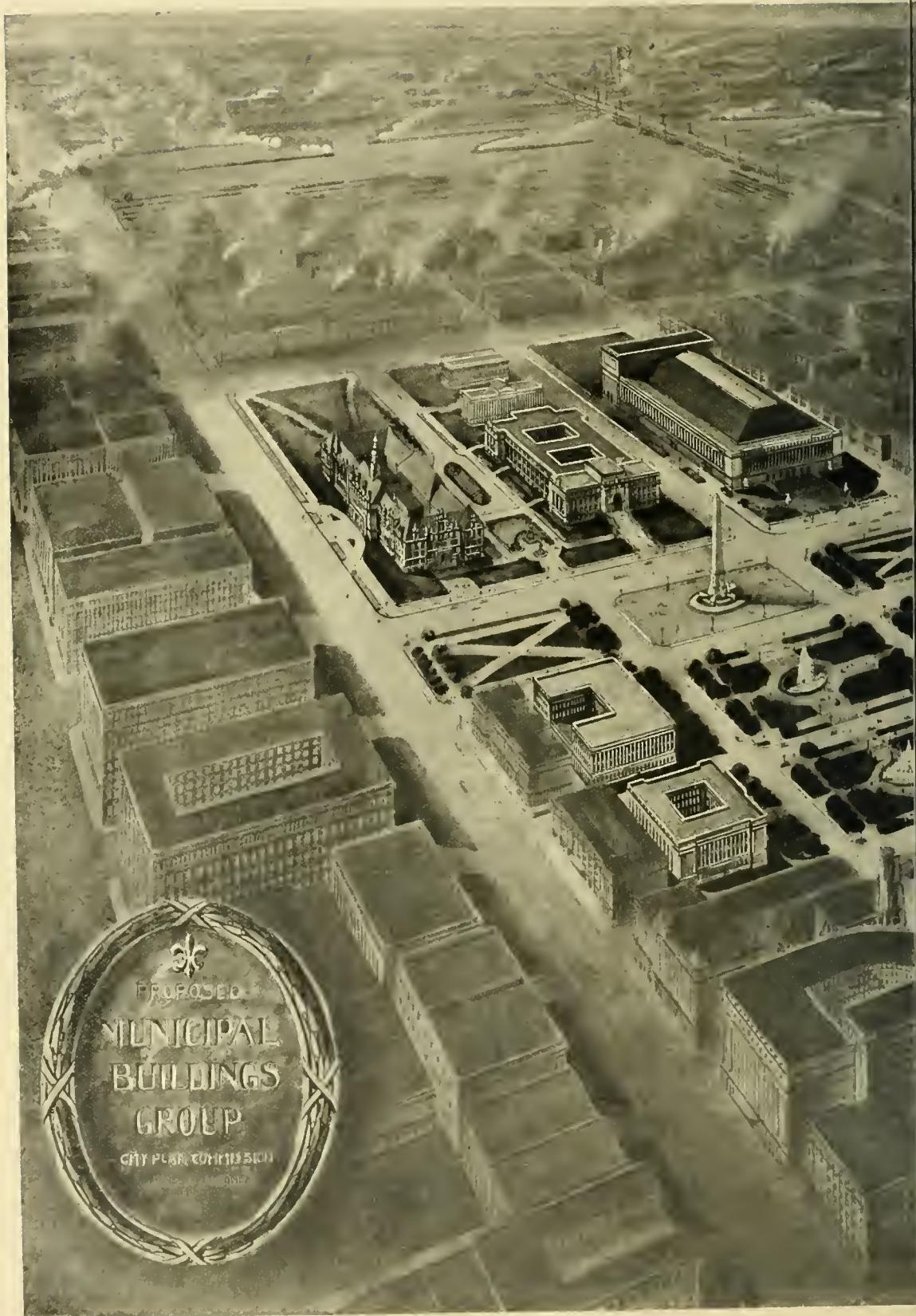
and the Municipal Courts Building, and not on Twelfth street, assuming that the city is able to control the character of the buildings that might be erected on the Twelfth street front in these two blocks. Unless the city can control the commercial structures fronting Twelfth street so that in height and design they will not be out of harmony with the public buildings in the group plan, the Commission recommends that the Twelfth street frontage be acquired. It



Present City Hall and Municipal Courts Building, located with the hope that they would form a nucleus for the grouping of future public buildings.

would be foolhardy to spend many millions of dollars for these large public buildings and their sites and not control their surroundings. On the other hand, the public-building group plan has nothing in common with Twelfth street. Twelfth street will always be a commercial thoroughfare, and as such should not be in part used for public-building purposes. If public buildings are to be placed on Twelfth street, they should be located on both sides of that thoroughfare, using the center line of Twelfth street as an axis. Studies of possible groupings, using Twelfth street as an axis, have been found impracticable, both in point of design and cost. Probably the only satisfactory way through which the city might be able to control buildings occupying frontage on the two blocks between Olive and Chestnut streets would be through the use of the power of excess condemnation. Authority for voting on a constitutional amendment permitting the exercise of the power of excess condemnation has been denied St. Louis and other cities of the State by the Legislature at its last two sessions.

In order, therefore, to insure absolute control by the city of the west side of Twelfth street and the east side of Fifteenth street, both between Olive and Chestnut streets, it will be necessary that the city acquire these sites by condemnation at the same time all the other ground is so acquired. When, or if, the right of excess condemnation, or other needed power, is then acquired by the city, these sites may be disposed of, if still thought desirable, with such restrictions as to height, character, and use of buildings to be erected thereon as will insure the harmony of the entire group contemplated in this plan. The



Bird's-eye view showing proposed Public Buildings Group Plan. Present City Hall upper left, present Public Library



center. Union Station upper right, and proposed Municipal Auditorium and Convention Hall upper center.

same condition applies to the western half of the two blocks between Chestnut street and Olive street and west of Fourteenth street. From the plan, also, it will be noticed that the block bounded by Market, Twelfth, Chestnut, and Thirteenth streets has been left free of buildings. This was done to afford an east and west vista which would be fully as desirable from Twelfth street as the north and south vista that would be seen from either Olive or Market streets. The proper architectural and landscape treatment of the blocks constituting the mall should produce splendid effects, as well as offering unlimited opportunities for statues, fountains, or other memorials.

Group Plan Would Help Natural Expansion of Business District.

An apparent criticism of the present plan that might be offered is that it would bar the natural westward expansion of the business district, while the location of the Court House and Federal Building in the vicinity of Twelfth street would decrease their usefulness by removing them too far from the present center of the business district. It is a generally accepted fact that public buildings rarely produce an appreciation of property values in their immediate locality. It has more often been the experience in other cities that public buildings for one reason or another usually produce unsatisfactory

surroundings and reduce rather than increase the value of surrounding property for commercial purposes. While there may be no justification for expecting an opposite effect in St. Louis, it is nevertheless believed that the creation of the public building group plan



View looking north from Municipal Courts Building, with Public Library in the background. This is the site of the contemplated mall. It is proposed to remove the present unsightly buildings and to develop the property into a formal garden in order to more properly express the dignity and importance of the city.

here proposed would result in an appreciation of property values and in substantial improvements on a large scale in the immediate vicinity. This assumption is warranted partly by reason of the fact that the property in the immediate neighborhood of the proposed public-building group is in an exceedingly run-down condition, and that the presence of an imposing group of build-

PROPOSED PLAZA
AT
UNION STATION
SHOWING ALSO
ALTERNATIVE LOCATION OF
MUNICIPAL AUDITORIUM

CITY PLAN COMMISSION
ST LOUIS MO

Bird's-eye view of suggested alternative location of Municipal Auditorium and Convention Hall, with plaza in front of Union Station.

ings affording splendid opportunities for light and air should encourage the building of hotels and other similar structures, not only in this immediate locality but extending westward as far as Eighteenth street and the Union Station.

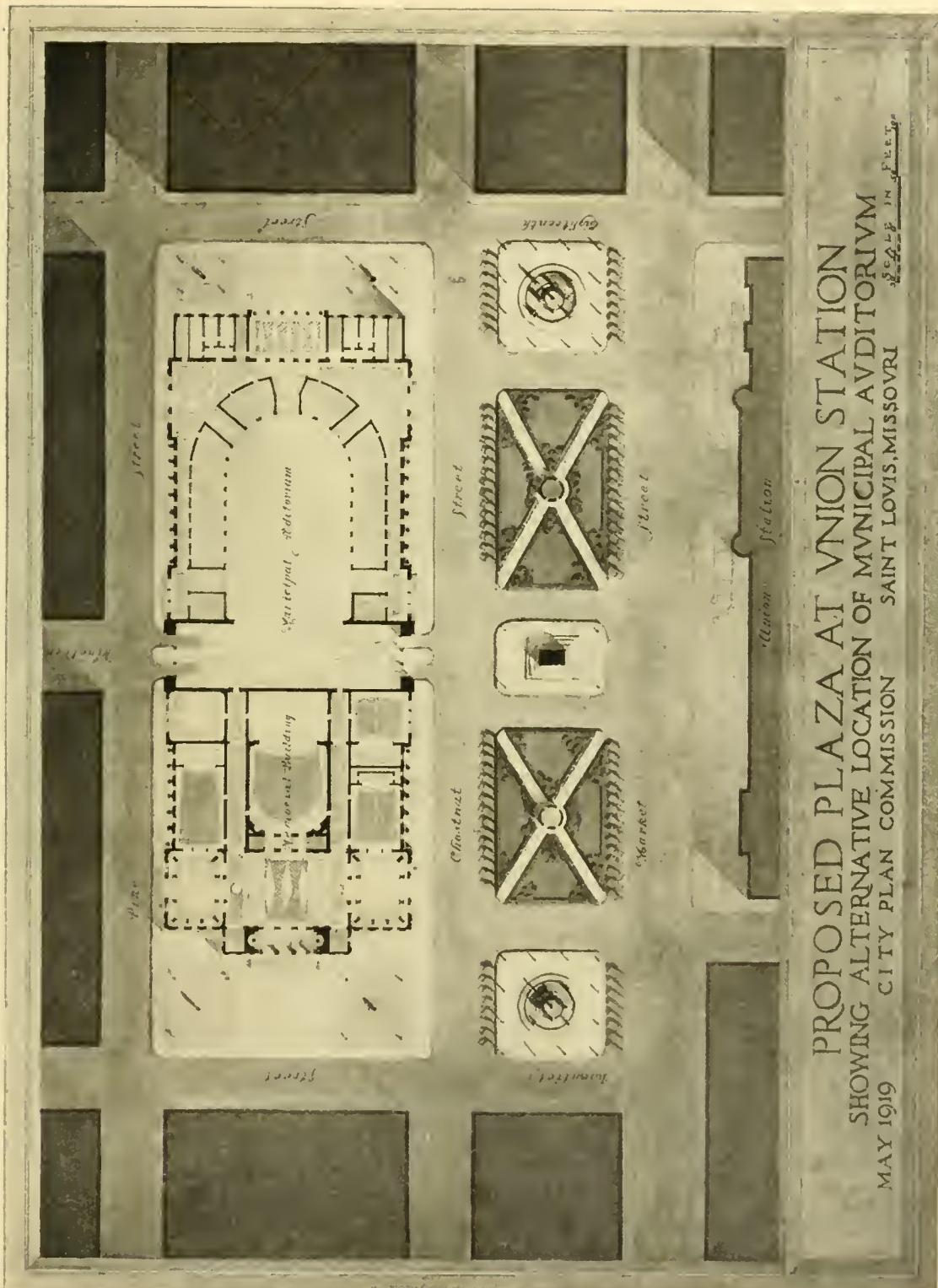
Previous studies made by the City Plan Commission have indicated that the expansion of the business district, particularly the commercial section, is destined to proceed westwardly between Olive street and Franklin avenue, inasmuch as the preponderance of vehicular as well as of street-car traffic enters over these and intermediate thoroughfares. The public-building group plan would therefore stimulate and encourage a high character of building development in a district where it might otherwise not be expected, and result in a higher value than could otherwise be expected, thus creating a well-balanced westward expansion of the business district.

St. Louis is growing rapidly. As the city grows the business district must expand. Twelfth street will inevitably become the central thoroughfare of the business district. This by no means will cause the depreciation or cessation of the present activities in the eastern section of the business district. It simply means that St. Louis must plan for an enlarged business district commensurate with the growth of the city. The public-building group plan will then be actually at the heart of the city's activities.

Mention has already been made of the poor condition of property in the vicinity of the present Municipal Buildings. Several plans have been proposed which would clear out and rehabilitate some of the property west of Twelfth street and lying between Olive and Market streets. It is believed that the public-building group plan proposed would do this more successfully than any plan heretofore devised. Certainly the poor character of the majority of buildings between Twelfth, Eighteenth, Market, and Olive streets is not merely a discredit to the city of St. Louis and an unpleasant daily reminder of the necessity for rehabilitation, but the present condition of this property represents a tremendous actual monetary loss to the city in the form of diminishing tax returns, which would be entirely overcome by the adoption and execution of the public-building group plan.

The Location of the Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building.

In view of the fact that one of the first public buildings to be built will be the Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building, assuming that the proposed municipal bond issue is favorably acted upon in the election of November next, the question of the location of this building has been the object of serious consideration by the City Plan Commission. The size and character of this building is such that it could not be erected on the average city block. In fact, our studies have indicated that there are but two or three locations where this building could be satisfactorily constructed. Our attention was first directed to the block bounded by Twelfth, Chestnut, Eleventh, and Market streets, in which block the city owns a considerable proportion of the property; but this block was found to be entirely inadequate in size. Later our attention was directed to the two blocks bounded by Twelfth street, Market street, Eleventh street, and Clark avenue as a prospective site for the Municipal Audi-



PROPOSED PLAZA AT UNION STATION
SHOWING ALTERNATIVE LOCATION OF MUNICIPAL AUDITORIUM
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The proposed Municipal Auditorium and Convention Hall requires a site of greater area than the average city block, and so important a structure should have sufficient space about it to afford a dignified and proper setting. By utilizing the two blocks from Pine to Chestnut and from Eighteenth to Twentieth streets for the building and creating a plaza between it and Union Station, a pleasing result could be obtained.

torium and Community Center Building. This would involve the closing of Walnut street between Eleventh and Twelfth. While it would afford a plot of sufficient size for the building, the ground is expensive and it was deemed undesirable to have a building of this character on one of the principal thoroughfares of the city, since its use by tremendous crowds of people would bring about a congestion of traffic on both Twelfth and Market streets, where traffic congestion would not be a desirable feature. Our final conclusion is that the best location for the Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building is the block bounded by Fourteenth, Market, Fifteenth streets and Clark avenue, possibly omitting the acquisition of the rear of the block on Clark avenue. This is one of the largest blocks in the downtown section of the city. It is not too far removed from the hotels and business district. It has the advantage of being adjacent to most of the principal traffic thoroughfares. By not placing the building on the principal trafficways, opportunity would be afforded about the entire building for the parking of automobiles and street cars to accommodate the crowds that might be expected, and without confusing or interfering with the usual traffic on the principal traffic routes. This site also has the further advantage of giving an imposing location for the Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building and making it an integral part of the proposed public-building group plan. Furthermore, the value of the ground is considerably less than in any other location.

The Municipal Auditorium As a War Memorial.

It has been suggested that the Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building be so designed and built as to constitute the city's memorial to those who served and died in the great war. This could very properly and effectively be done. Such designs of the building as have been made have contemplated this feature, although it is not essential that the two ideas be combined. St. Louis needs a Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building, and needs it soon. Regardless of whether a memorial feature is combined with it or not, a Municipal Auditorium should be built and so designed as to combine all of the features necessary to make it a successful building, used continually the year round in order to make it a satisfactory investment and to justify its great cost.

The Surroundings of Union Station.

St. Louis is probably criticized more because of the surroundings of its Union Station than for any other reason. The necessity for improving this neighborhood is almost unanimously admitted. As a suggestion for accomplishing this purpose there is presented herewith an alternative plan for locating the Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building opposite the Union Station, occupying the two blocks bounded by Chestnut, Eighteenth, Pine, and Twentieth streets and opening up as a plaza the two intermediate blocks bounded by Market, Eighteenth, Chestnut, and Twentieth streets. This location for the Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building is not deemed as desirable as the previously mentioned location immediately west

of the Municipal Courts Building in the municipal-building group plan. However, it opens up some attractive possibilities which should receive further

serious consideration. It is possible that a sufficient number of public buildings will be needed within the next few years to warrant undertaking the municipal-building group plan. To locate the Municipal Auditorium and Community Center Building near Union



The view in front of Union Station, the main entrance to the city, the first impression received by our visitors. A spacious plaza is suggested as a substitute.

Station as suggested would not prevent the execution of the group plan if undertaken. Its location at this point, however, does not afford the degree of accessibility that is inherent in the previously mentioned site.

Conclusion.

In 1904 a Public Buildings Commission was appointed to study the location of public buildings in St. Louis. This commission presented an admirable report, but their suggestions were not followed. The occasion for their appointment was the contemplated erection of the Municipal Courts Building. Fortunately, the opportunity for a public-buildings group plan that will be a credit to St. Louis is still open. Now that other structures are soon to be built we should again give thought to the question of the best design and location for them, so that whatever is done may not be in continuation of preceding hap-hazard methods of our city's growth. Even though it may take years to complete a public-building group plan such as is here suggested, whatever we do now should be done in the spirit of building a future city in accordance with some definite plan that will be truly representative of our city, our citizenship, and enlightened methods of city building.

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